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Balz Engler

Quoting Shakespeare*:* "Words, words, words"?

In *Hamlet* one of the most difficult speeches for an actor to deliver is probably the soliloquy beginning with the words "To be or not to be" (3.1.63).[1] I remember an actor speaking the lines lying on his back, his head towards the audience, looking up into the flies.[2] The speech is so familiar to audiences that some spectators feel tempted to articulate the words along with the actor, others may even be disappointed that Hamlet is not holding a skull, as they had erroneously expected (it features in another scene). Productions have to overcome the expectations produced by familiarity to suggest that these are words spontaneously uttered by a character—a challenge difficult to meet.

This is an extreme example of the fact that a classical play like *Hamlet* is not only alive in theatrical performance or in the reading of a book, but also in the minds of people; indeed, this presence helps to shape their experience of the play. They have grown up and been educated in a certain manner, they have shared certain experiences, etc.; in other words, they have a culture in common. Classics are part of this culture; indeed, a classic may be defined as a work that has left the book, is present in the discourse of a community, and helps to define it.[3]

This presence makes itself felt in different forms: as stories perceived to be representative of certain patterns of experience (e. g., rejected love leading to madness), as figures that are considered to be typical (like the man who could not make up his mind), or as phrases and passages ("Though this be madness, yet there is method in it").

Even Shakespeare himself, the poetic genius, is such a presence. Among the many enlightening observations in Péter Dávidházi's pioneering study of *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare* there is one I have always liked to refer to in

[1] The English text quoted in this article, as commonly in dictionaries of quotation, is that of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1914). Available at http://www.bartleby.com/70/.
[2] It was Helmuth Lohner at the Zurich Schauspielhaus in 1974—obviously a memorable moment if perhaps for the wrong reasons.
[3] Balz Engler, *Poetry and Community* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990), 55-57.

particular: that Hungarians learned to revere Shakespeare before they got to know his works.[4]

In the memories of different cultural communities, different aspects of *Hamlet* may play different roles. Well-known examples of this include the role of Hamlet in Russia as the intellectual who has no role in society, as dramatized in Chekhov's *Ivanov*, and *Hamletisme* in France, where Hamlet is seen as the person striving for the absolute, but aware that it cannot be reached.[5]

Where the members of a community draw on this presence in writing or in conversation, they will do so for a variety of reasons: because they want to demonstrate their belonging to the community of those familiar with the play, because they want to draw on its cultural authority, or because it offers them the words for something they could not otherwise express so well. At the same time, by referring to Shakespeare they also reaffirm the authority of the canonical text.

But even where people are no longer aware of quoting a specific text, such a reference shapes the way they perceive and describe phenomena and thus helps to define their culture.

In the following I am going to look at some examples of how such references to *Hamlet* have been used, a research area that has not yet met as much interest as it deserves. The observations are bound to be provisional, to say the least, but they may be suggestive of both the difficulties and the potential of such research. I shall concentrate on how *Hamlet* has been quoted in English, German, and French.

The comparison will be based on three widely respected dictionaries of quotations, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Büchmann's *Geflügelte Worte,* and the *Dictionnaire de Citations* by Oster, Montreynod and

[4] Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002) 110-111.

[5] Michèle Willems, "Hamlet in France," http://hamlet-works.net/BIBL/HamFra.htm, accessed on 26. 03. 2017.

Matignon,[6] as well as the findings of the *HyperHamlet* project.[7]

Before proceeding, however, I have to touch on three problems, concerning common knowledge, the double function of dictionaries of quotations, and translation. How can we determine whether a quotation is common knowledge in a community? There is no reliable statistical evidence for the popularity of quotations. Less dependable methods have to be used: *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* has usually employed a team of educated people from different walks of life to decide on the inclusion or exclusion of material. When Georg Büchmann put together his *Geflügelte Worte* he decided himself on the inclusion of phrases, supported by users who made suggestions. Oster, Montreynaud and Matignon's French *Dictionnaire de Citations*, without indicating the criteria of selection, vaguely presents itself as "un oeuvre collectivement personelle" [a work collectively personal], offering "une anthologie de citations assimilées, mais surtout de possibilités" [an anthology of assimilated quotations, but mainly of possibilities].[8]

The statement by the French editors reminds us that dictionaries of quotations usually serve a double purpose: they document the origin of familiar phrases, and they also suggest, often in the first place, less familiar, but apt phrases to individuals who would like to impress their audiences by their cultural sophistication. Because of this, many dictionaries arrange the quotations according to theme.

Translation, finally, affects the common knowledge of quotations. In English, there has been a fairly well-established Shakespeare text since the eighteenth century, which has made it easy for speakers of the language to renew their familiarity with specific passages. In other languages, successive translations of the play may have produced distinct versions of the same English passages, which made it more difficult for a

[6] *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 6th edition, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); *Geflügelte Worte*, ed. Georg Büchmann, durchgesehen von Alfred Grunow (Munich: dtv, 1967, first edition 1868); *Dictionnaire de Citations*, ed. Pierre Oster, Florence Montreynaud and Jeanne Matignon (Paris: Le Robert, 1990). Büchmann uses Schlegel–Tieck as a source, Oster et al. Yves Bonnefoy. Shakespeare, *Hamlet. Jules César*, trans. Yves Bonnefoy (Paris: Le club français du livre, 1964).

[7] This project at the University of Basel systematically collects Hamlet quotations and allusions, with a focus on English literature; other languages are also included, but only on a casual basis. Available at http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/

[8] Oster et al., p. xiii.

phrase to become familiar. The competition between translators would aggravate the problem, as they would try to show their distinctive qualities at precisely the points where phrases had become commonly known.

The number of quotations listed confirms expectations and casts light on the importance of the play in the respective cultural communities: the English dictionary lists 193 quotations, while the German one has 30, and the French has 8 items. The large number of German quotations is the result of two factors: the special role Shakespeare has played in German culture, beginning with the displacement of French enlightenment poetics in the eighteenth century, and the establishment of the Schlegel-Tieck translation as a classic in its own right (in the sense mentioned here). However, four phrases are shared by all three dictionaries:

> 1.4.99: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." – "Etwas ist faul im Staate Dänemark." – "Il y a quelque chose de pourri dans le royaume de Danemark."
>
> 1.5.185: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." – "Es gibt mehr Ding' im Himmel und auf Erden, / Als eure Schulweisheit sich träumt," – "Il y a plus de choses dans le ciel et sur la terre, Horatio, que n'en rêve votre philosophie."
>
> 3.1.63: "To be, or not to be: that is the question:" – "Sein oder Nichtsein, das ist hier die Frage." – "Être ou ne pas être: voilà la question."
>
> 5.2.297: "The rest is silence." – "Der Rest ist Schweigen." – "Le reste est silence."

All these quotations consist of full sentences, are characterized by striking wording, and, like proverbs, generally applicable. This may have made it easier for them to become part of what may be called the common European stock of *Hamlet*.[9]

[9] Strikingly, the German and French dictionaries also list two quotations each that have no equivalent in English. In German: 1.2.13: "Mit einem heitern, einem nassen Aug'" [With one auspicious and one dropping eye]; 5.2.147: "In Bereitschaft sein ist alles." [the readiness is all.] In French: 1.3.72–73: "Garde-toi d'entrer dans une querelle; mais engagé / Mène-la de façon que l'on se garde de toi. / Donne à tous ton oreille, à très peu ta voix." [Beware / Of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in, / Bear 't that th' opposed may beware of thee, / Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;] ; 4.3.11: "Aux maux désespérés / Les remèdes du désespoir, ou rien

Significantly, the phrases started to be quoted at different times in different languages, in a manner that suggests a link between the dates of first occurrence and the number of quotations. The moment when these phrases are first recorded in the respective languages is surprisingly late:

> "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," English 1746, German 1841, French 1882.[10]
>
> "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," English 1817, German 1766–67, French 1892.
>
> "To be, or not to be: that is the question," English 1662, German 1782, French 1857.
>
> "The rest is silence," English 1856, German 1868,[11] French 1885.

So much for frequencies and dates. Things get more interesting when we look at individual cases. Three examples may illustrate the vagaries of quoting.

"For this relief much thanks" (1.1.10): with these words, listed by the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, but not by Büchmann or the *Dictionnaire des Citations*, Francisco thanks Barnardo for relieving him of his guard duty. Marked as a quotation by its archaism, men may use this phrase jocularly after having urinated.[13] Few of them will have the *Hamlet* scene in mind when pronouncing them, but it may be the other way around, when hearing them at the very beginning of a performance. The phrase also occurs in Walter Scott's diary (1826),[14] where, explicitly referring to the play, he

du tout." [diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are reliev'd, / Or not at all]

[10] The English dates are based on *HyperHamlet*; the German ones on *Deutsche Literatur von Lessing bis Kafka*. *Studienbibliothek CD-ROM* (Berlin: Directmedia Publishing, 2000), from which also the quotations from German literary authors are taken; the French ones are based on *Gallica* (http://gallica.bnf.fr/).

[11] This is the date of Büchmann's first edition. The fact that the phrase is listed there suggests that it must have been in circulation already.

[13] *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases: British and American*, ed. Eric Partridge (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 137.

[14] [Diary entry. Friday 10 November 1826]. *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 235.

quotes the phrase (obviously from memory) after having left a melancholy spell behind. In the Victorian period, the phrase for many seems to have lost its close association with *Hamlet*, as references in newspapers show. And in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) Bloom, having given himself what the Victorians called hand-relief, reminds himself of the origin of the phrase: "For this relief much thanks. In Hamlet, that is."[15]

Considered in their contexts, each item tells us something specific about the status of *Hamlet*. Scott gratefully uses the words of the master, and Bloom uses them with respectful ironical distance. Both are obviously aware of quoting *Hamlet*, whereas the men in the urinal may just have overheard a quaint but useful phrase on what still continues to be a social occasion.

"Mit einem lachenden und einem weinenden Auge" [with a laughing and a crying eye] is quite a common expression in German,[16] whereas its apparent English source "With one auspicious and one dropping eye" (1.2.13) is not even listed in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations.* Röhrich's *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten* lists the phrase as a *Hamlet* quotation that has become anonymous.[18] Büchmann, however, lists Schlegel's version, "mit einem heitern, einem nassen Aug'" [with a serene, a wet eye], and in this form it is only sporadically quoted by others.[19] It is difficult to

[15] James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al. (London: The Bodley Head, 1993), p. 305.

[16] The same holds true for its Hungarian equivalent. It appears in, e. g., the entry 'szem' (eye) n. "'az egyik szeme sír, a másik nevet' egyszerre örül is, meg szomorkodik is" (he/she is cyring with one eye and is laughing with the other/one eye crying, the other laughing" in *Magyar szólástár. Szólások, helyzetmondatok, közmondások értelmező és fogalomköri szótára.* Vilmos Bárdos, ed., (Budapest: Tinta, 2004) p. 319. (Hungarian phrasebook. Dictionary of idioms, situational phrases, proverbs). János Arany's classic translation is more complicated: "a szemünk / Mosolygva egyik, a másik könyezve". William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, dán királyfi,* transl. János Arany in *Összes művei. 2. kötet. Tragédiák, színművek* (Budapest: Európa, 1964) 227-329, p.234. (Natália Pikli, private communication)

[18] Lutz Röhrich, ed., *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten* (Berlin: Directmedia, 2004), p. 412.

[19] A striking variation of it is to be found in a newspaper article by Josef Roth on the music of a Berlin dancehall being heard in the adjacent cinema showing a grim newsreel: "dieses nationale Bürgertum, das mit einem heiteren Bein und einem nassen Aug' Miterleber des schrecklichen Proletariertodes ist" [this national bourgeoisie, which, with a serene leg and a wet eye, witnesses the horrible death of a proletarian]. Josef Roth, "Ruhr-Totenfeier mit Shimmy-Klang," *Vorwärts*, 21.4.1923. Roth obviously takes it for granted that his readers will recognize the quotation quality of the phrase.

understand why this should be so; we may speculate that Schlegel's metrical form may have presented problems with a phrase that would usually appear in prose. Röhrich points out that there are also Romanian and Hungarian-German fairy tales in which a king with such a pair of eyes occurs, and Wander's *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexicon* lists the proverb "Mit einem Auge weinen und mit dem andern lachen" [to cry with one eye and to laugh with the other].[21] In other words, we are probably dealing with a case where an unusual phrase seemed to be in need of an origin and *became* a quotation.

The third example may belong to the same class: "Morgenluft wittern" is a common expression in German. Both Büchmann and Röhrich give Schlegel's *Hamlet* translation ("ich wittre Morgenluft") as a source. The Ghost speaks the words "But soft, methinks I scent the morning air" (1.5.64), when it must withdraw, because day is breaking.[22] In German, however, the phrase means something quite different, almost the opposite: "to see one's chance." How can the change to a positive meaning be explained? The answer seems to be quite simple: Schlegel, keen to render Shakespeare's originality, translated his text literally, without taking into account that the words he produced were identical to a phrase which seems to have been idiomatic in the sense it still has today.[23] An educated German-speaking person today would associate the phrase with *Hamlet*, but retain its positive meaning, and be slightly surprised and bewildered by how it is used in the play.

Both "Mit einem lachenden und einem weinenden Auge" and "Ich wittre Morgenluft" may then be examples of proverbial phrases having *become* Shakespeare quotations. They show how a cultural community may feel the need to assign unusual phrases to a specific origin and chooses a familiar source for the purpose. At the same time, this choice also reaffirms and enhances the cultural status of this source.

[21] *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexicon*, ed. Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander, Available online at http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=Wander&lemid=WA01384&mode=Vernetzung&hitlist=&patternlist=&mainmode=, accessed on 3. 17. 2017.

[22] Büchmann also gives Gottfried August Bürger's ballad "Lenore" of 1773 as a possible source, where the phrase has a Shakespearean ring (stanza 28) and is itself probably a quotation from Wieland's *Hamlet* translation of 1766 ("Mich däucht, ich wittre die Morgen-Luft").

[23] The phrase occurs in Matthias Claudius, *Briefe an Andres* (1775), and several times in Eichendorff, e.g., in *Dichter und ihre Gesellen* (1833), in places where a Shakespearean association is unlikely.

The existence of familiar quotations as such can tell us something about the status and the history of a work like *Hamlet* in a cultural community. The double existence of familiar quotations, both in the text and in the minds of people, also means that quoting is not a one-way street. A classic like *Hamlet* both feeds and ingests the discourse of a community, subtly transforming both.